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ABSTRACT

This experiment asked Clinical Psychology and Counseling graduate students to evaluate the mental health of strangers using attitude statements and behavior statements purported to refer to fictitious strangers. Holding behavior statements constant, strangers displaying attitudes dissimilar to the students' were rated as significantly more disturbed than attitudinally similar strangers. Holding similarity constant, strangers described as demonstrating severely disturbed behavior were perceived to be more disturbed. Students reported more confidence in the accuracy of their evaluations of similar strangers. No relationship was found between the ratings given to strangers and the student's major, the degree pursued, or the coursework completed. (Author)

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Abstract

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The Effects of Attitude Similarity on Psychologists' and Counselors' Evaluations of Patients' Mental Health

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A considerable body of research has been built upon the relationship between interpersonal attraction and attitudinal similarity. Recent research has found a reinforcement model useful in both explaining and predicting that relationship (Byrne, 1971). The vast majority of these studies have found a highly stable and widely generalizable, positive, linear relationship between attitudinal similarity and interpersonal attraction. One outgrowth of this research has been the recognition that attitudinal similarity is also related to perceptions of a stranger's adjustment.

Luborsky (1971) has completed a comprehensive review of the research on factors influencing the outcome of psychotherapy. Many of the articles reviewed link counselor-client similarity to counseling success (Carson & Heine, 1962;Lesser, 1961; Lichtenstein, 1966; Sapolsky, 1965; and Welkowitz, 1967). Equally important to this research are those studies indicating a relationship between client likeability and counseling success (Stoler, 1963). It should be noted that the articles reviewed by Luborsky (1971), apropos to this research, are correlational in nature.

The present research has its basis in the research reviewed by Luborsky (1971) and in Byrne's (1971) conception that attitudinal statements may come to serve as unconditioned stimuli for eliciting affect. As Byrne (1961, p.713) has noted,

> Disagreement raises the unpleasant possibility that we are to some degree stupid, uninformed, immoral, or insane. An alternative possibility is that it is the other person who is deficient in one or more of these characteristics.

This experiment differs from previous research in that the subjects' perceptions of the mental health of the strangers they were to evaluate was the key factor and not a variable of secondary importance. Also, instead of college Freshmen and Sophomores from all majors, the subjects in this experiment were Counseling and Clinical Psychology graduate students who will soon be making judgments similar to those called for here.

The hypotheses tested in this experiment were: (1) the behavioral and attitudinal statements would have a significant effect on the Counseling and Clinical Psychology graduate students' evaluations of the strangers' mental health, (2) interaction effects with the above variables would be found for the program-of-study variable, and (3) students would differ in the confidence they placed in their evaluations.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were selected from two student populations. The first group was representative of graduate students in the Clinical Psychology program at Oklahoma State University. The second group was representative of graduate students in the Student Personnel and Guidance program at Oklahoma State University.

Of the sixty-three students in five graduate courses pretested, nine were in majors other than those being considered and were, therefore, dropped from the study Of the remaining fifty-four, thirty subjects were randomly chosen from those willing. to complete all phases of the experiment. Their characteristics are noted in Table I.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Procedure

I) Each student was pretested on a fifteen-item Survey of Attitudes adapted from the scale devised by Byrne (1971). A special identification system was used to

who displayed attitudes highly dissimilar to those of the students were perceived as more disturbed than strangers who displayed highly similar attitudes.

2.2) The attitudinal similarity level affected the ratings given by Counseling students ($F = 10.56$; $df = 2,58$; $p < .001$) and Clinical Psychology students ($F = 30.81$; $df = 2.58$; $p < .001$) similarly. Significant effects were found due to both the interaction of attitudinal similarity and program of study and the interaction of attitudinal similarity and the behavioral statements received by the students. The above two interaction effects accounted for 4% and 9%, respectively, of the within-subjects variance ratings.

2.3) Significant effects were also found due to the interaction of the three independent variables, similarity x program of study x behavioral statements. This interaction effect accounted for an additional 16% of the within-subjects variance in the ratings, leaving only 30% of the within-subjects variance unaccounted for.

The same statistical procedures were used in the analysis of the confidence each student felt in the accuracy of his ratings. The level of confidence which students had in their evaluations of the strangers' mental health was affected only by the level of attitudinal similarity between the student and the stranger being evaluated ($F = 3.90$; $df = 2,58$; $p < .05$).

Apparently students had greater confidence in their evaluations of strangers very high in attitudinal similarity to themselves than they had in their evaluations of strangers moderate or very low in attitudinal similarity to themselves.

Discussion

In the present experiment, Counseling and Clinical Psychology graduate students were found to be significantly affected by the level of attitudinal similarity which the stranger displayed. They rated strangers displaying attitudes highly dissimilar from their own as significantly lower in adjustment and as significantly more disturbed than strangers displaying attitudes highly similar to their own. However, unlike research reported previously (e.g. Feuquay & Pirruccello, Note 1), the ratings of these students were also significantly affected by the behavior statements which they received. Given the tremendous variability in the amount of coursework the students had completed in their graduate majors, it is not feasible to say that the specific training which they had received effected this change. Too many factors have not been examined. While determining the cause for the apparent increased attention paid by these students to the behavioral statements is beyond the scope of this study, this finding is, nevertheless, heartening. For, unlike the attitudinal similarity information, the behavioral statements represent valid input to the mental-health-rating process.

Both Clinical Psychology and Counseling students' level of confidence regarding their evaluations were found to be affected only by the degree of attitudinal similarity between the student and the stranger they were evaluating. Students expressed significantly greater confidence in their evaluations when the stranger they were evaluating was very high in attitudinal similarity to themselves than they did when the stranger was either moderate or very low in similarity to themselves.

If these findings represent an accurate reflection of diagnostic situations in the field, the question must then be asked and answered by those involved in the training of counselors and clinicians as to whether or not this is acceptable. While a recent trend in the area of counseling is the use of the counselor's attitudes and beliefs as tools for enhancing the possibility of positive change in the client, the implications of this research are that discrepancies in the counselor's and client's attitudes may be providing a markedly different result than that intended; the evaluation of the client as more or less disturbed than is warranted by the behavior which he exhibits. This is, in short, misdiagnosis.

guarantee confidentiality.

II) During the second week after completing the Survey of Attitudes pretest, each student received an experimental packet containing:

a) Instruction Sheet- (1) described this research as an attempt to determine the accuracy of the Health-Sickness Rating Scale (Luborsky, 1962) when the judgments reflected by it are based on a minimal amount of information, (2) gave criteria and directions for the use of the Health-Sickness Rating Scale and (3) asked students to read all the given information about each "patient" prior to making their evaluations.

b) Behavioral Statement- indicated the level of the strangers' mental health.

c) Three "fictitious strangers'" Surveys of Attitudes- each followed by a Health-Sickness Rating Scale on which to evaluate the stranger described by the Survey preceding that Scale.

III) Upon completion of the above task, each student was asked to assign a grade, ranging from A through F, to each of the evaluations which he had completed. This grade was to be a reflection of the confidence the student felt in the accuracy of his evaluation.

Experimental Conditions

Levels of Stranger Mental Health. Each student was randomly assigned to one of three groups. Group one evaluated three strangers described as Severely Disturbed by the Behavioral Statement sheet. Group two evaluated three strangers described as being Mildly Disturbed by the Behavioral Statement sheet. Group three evaluated three strangers described as being Normal by the Behavioral Statement sheet.

Levels of Attitudinal Similarity. One of three levels of student-stranger attitudinal similarity was given to each ficitious stranger through the marking of the fifteen-item Survey of Attitudes purported to be that of the stranger. These levels were low, medium, and high similarity and were obtained by altering the number of attitude statements on which the student and stranger agreed and disagreed. The proportions of similar attitudes were 0.20 for low, 0.47 for medium, and 0.80 for high. Each student evaluated three strangers, one in each of the three attitudinal similarity levels.

Results

The results of the Analysis of Variance performed on the Health-Sickness Rating Scale scores can be found in Table 2. These scores may be viewed as indicative of the perceived mental health of the fictitious strangers. A Sum of Squares ratio for each effect found significant is included in this table.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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The results of Duncan's Multiple Range test on this data can be found in Table 3.

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Insert Table 3 about here

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The analyses summarized in Tables 2 and 3, and additional F-tests for simple effects noted below, indicate that:

1.1) The behavioral statements had a significant effect on students' ratings of the strangers' mental health. Those behavioral statements accounted for 37% of the between-subjects variance.

1.2) The behavioral statements affected the ratings given by Counseling students ($F = 5.58$; $df = 2,24$; $p < .025$) and Clinical Psychology students ($F = 30.82$; $df = 2,24$; $p < .001$) similarly. There were significant effects due to the interaction of the program of study with the behavioral statements. These interaction effects accounted for an additional 33% of the between-subjects variance in the mental health ratings, leaving only 30% of the between-subjects variance unaccounted for.

2.1) The level of student-stranger attitudinal similarity had a significant effect on how well adjusted the strangers were perceived to be. The level of attitudinal similarity accounted for 41% of the within-subjects variance in the ratings. Strangers

Reference Notes

1. Feuquay, J. & Pirruccello, F. Effects of perceived mental health on the similarity-attraction relationship. Paper read at 1975 meeting of the American Psychological Association in Chicago, Illinois.

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Table 1

CHARACTERISTICS OF SUBJECTS

	Clinical Students			Counseling Students		
	range	median	mean	range	median	mean
Age	23-32	24.75	26.2	21-29	24.5	24.3
Number of graduate semester hours completed	10-99	45.5	42.6	0-90	22.0	31.9
Degree goal	11 Ph.D. 1 MHS 3 MS			7 Ed.D. 8 MS		
Sex	8 Male 7 Female			9 Male 6 Female		

Table 2

ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE TABLE FOR THE HEALTH-SICKNESS RATING SCALE SCORES
(including SS_r for significant effects)

Source	SS	df	ms	F	p	SS_r
Total	19605	89	--	--	--	
Between Subjects	15056	29	--	--	--	
Program of Study	552	1	552	3.36	n.s.	
Behavior Statement	5524	2	2762	16.82	<.001	.37
Program X Behavior	5039	2	2519.5	15.34	<.001	.33
$Error_b$	3941	24	164.208	--	--	
Within Subjects	4549	70	--	--	--	
Similarity	1847	2	923.5	37.96	<.001	.41
Similarity X Program	166	2	83	3.41	<.05	.04
Similarity X Behavior	406	4	101.5	4.17	<.01	.09
Similarity X Program X Behavior	719	4	179.75	7.39	<.001	.16
$Error_w$	1411	58	24.33	--	--	

Table 3

EFFECTS OF THE BEHAVIOR STATEMENTS AND THE LEVEL OF SIMILARITY ON THE HEALTH-SICKNESS RATING SCALE SCORES: DUNCAN'S MULTIPLE RANGE TEST

Levels Compared	Difference between X's	Critical difference	p
Behavior Statements:			
normal vs. severe	18.866	7.174	<.05
normal vs. mild	6.4	6.830	n.s.
mild vs. severe	12.466	6.830	<.05
Levels of Similarity			
low vs. high	11.034	7.174	<.05
low vs. medium	4.5	6.830	n.s.
medium vs. high	6.534	6.830	n.s.